

PAUL VAN OSTAIJEN

Translated by Sascha Bru and Tom Willaert

## A User's Guide to Lyric: Paralipomena

### Translators' Introduction

Paul van Ostaijen (1896–1928) lived most of his life in Flanders, the predominantly Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, and wrote the bulk of his small yet impressive oeuvre in Dutch. Still read today in Belgian secondary schools, the poet is remembered above all because he almost single-handedly led the breakthrough of the so-called historical avant-gardes, and expressionism in particular, within Flemish-Dutch literature. What makes Van Ostaijen stand out among the international avant-gardes is the speed with which he absorbed innovations from abroad and put them to new use. Indeed, the poet reinvented his own writing aesthetic with each collection of poetry he produced in his short life.

Van Ostaijen produced five poetry volumes, two of which—*De feesten van angst en pijn* (The feasts of fear and agony, circa 1921) and the unfinished *Eerste boek van Schmoll* (First book of Schmoll, circa 1928)—appeared posthumously. His debut *Music Hall* (1916) took as its main point of reference French *unanimisme*, the movement launched with Jules Romains's *La Vie unanime* (1908). Like Romains's thought, and that of other intellectuals associated with the French commune of the Abbaye de Créteil, Van Ostaijen's early poetics were based on the psychological concept of group consciousness and collective emotion, and proclaimed the need for the poet to merge with this transcendent consciousness.

*Het Sienjaal* (The signal, 1918), Van Ostaijen's second poetry book and his first properly expressionist work, extended the desire to speak in the name of a larger collective. More outspoken than *Music Hall*, *Het Sienjaal* drew on German sources for inspiration, especially the German Activism aesthetic found in journals like *Die Aktion*, *Die Weissen Blätter*, and *Der Sturm*, championed by writers such as Kurt Hiller, René Schickele, and Heinrich Mann. Moving between a



pessimistic outlook on the depravity of society on the one hand, and a romantic belief in the possibility of triggering its change through art on the other, *Het Sienjaal* displayed an affinity with the celebration of love and the *Welt- und Allgefühl* (“world feeling and all-inclusive feeling”) found in the work of Franz Werfel, Ludwig Rubiner, Leonhard Frank, and Kurt Pinthus, and for that reason was labelled “humanitarian expressionism.” *Het Sienjaal* also marked a move away from the style of *Music Hall*. The poems in this second volume display an associative strand with parallels in hymnal free verse, and in the collage verse of Else Lasker-Schüler.

Van Ostaijen’s third and final published volume, *Bezette Stad* (Occupied city, 1921), again fully reshaped his poetic project. Combining handwritten passages, experimental font typography, and various print colors, this visually unique book recounts the occupation of the seaport town of Antwerp during the Great War in a cut-up narrative that haphazardly cites objects and speech from popular culture. While critics tended to view it solely as a Dadaist experiment, the book recalls the most beautiful work of Guillaume Apollinaire and Blaise Cendrars.<sup>1</sup>

“A User’s Guide to Lyric” (1927) was written only a few years before Van Ostaijen’s premature death and demonstrates that once again his poetics had taken a different turn. The role of typography, so central to *Bezette Stad*, recedes, as does the romantic stance that had characterized *Het Sienjaal*. Instead Van Ostaijen espouses an aesthetic of *poésie pure*, a term he claims to have coined several years before Henri Brémond published his much-debated book *La Poésie pure* in 1926, and which Van Ostaijen had begun to use to characterize the poems that were to make up the unfinished *Eerste boek van Schmoll*. Readers might instantly recognize affinities between the poetics described here and those of T. S. Eliot and certain representatives of the New Criticism. The Platonic and Kantian overtones of Van Ostaijen’s ideas can hardly be ignored. The text also demonstrates that he has digested elements from French and Belgian Surrealism, as well as from the Constructivism associated with the magazine *De Stijl* published by Theo van Doesburg in the Netherlands.

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1/ For a partial translation of the volume in English, see the anthology *Burning City: Poems of Metropolitan Modernity*, ed. Jed Rasula and Tim Conley (South Bend, IN: Action Books, 2012).



A version of this text originally served as the script for a lecture and reading delivered in late 1925 in Brussels and again in early 1926 in Antwerp.<sup>2</sup> Not translated here is the extended first part of the speech in which Van Ostaijen, in a highly satirical tone and through a panoply of references to local customs, describes the Flemish readership as by and large disinterested in poetry itself, yet very much interested in the figure of the poet—provided he is a bohemian pauper willing to undergo infinite suffering in the name of beauty. This first part of his speech, which Van Ostaijen ironically called the part on “local optimism,” is followed by a section of equal length regarding his aesthetic of writing. This second part, which he again ironically labelled “lyrical pessimism,” is presented in full here. A remnant of an avant-garde performance, this text displays many features of the genre of the manifesto and is balanced between absolute seriousness and an absurd, self-mocking satire that has lost very little of its appeal.

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2/ The text itself was published in the journal *Vlaamsche Arbeid* (Flemish labor) 20:1–2 (1927): 50–63.



Madam, Sirs! Honorable, esteemed audience! Allow me to go ahead and say: "Silence." Oh no, by no means do I request silence for its own sake. I do so merely by way of consecration. After all, at this very moment—which I deem solemn because of the necessary connection that exists in our literary tradition between a moment and its being called solemn—at this very moment, I say, two miracles are unfolding. The first miracle is that a group of people would want to listen attentively, as a group, to the declarations of—to put it bluntly—a poet; the second miracle is that a poet would be explaining himself.

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Poetry originates from the demonic powers of the word as well as from the clash between those powers and the awareness of the futility of any attempt at self-expression. The desire for self-expression and the awareness of its futility continuously interact and often struggle with one another. In fact, the more means a poet acquires to restrain the demonic powers of words on the surface, the more the poet starts doubting the effectiveness and truthfulness of these means. For insofar as the poet's consciousness can take hold of words, their demonism only leads to hopelessness. For instance, not a single poem related to the phenomenon of a fish could ever impress me more than the word "fish" itself. Because the affirmative demonism of the word and the poet's inherently failing means of representation are given as ever-present antonymic elements, they cannot be separated. In a way, the pair could be likened to the bygone metaphysical dogma: unlike the Creator, who allegedly manifests himself in his creation of us in his self-image, we humans can never fully express ourselves through language. As a result, the poet accepts his task as a last resort. The poet, who has access only to a limited, subjective reality, tends to be nostalgic for the original land that was once presumably far more vast. His nostalgia is worsened by the knowledge that the perfect exteriorization of subjectivity is impossible. However strong and rich his subjectivity, the limitations of his knowledge always cast



a dark shadow over him. Indeed, a poem is never as well wrought as a mammal whose umbilical cord finally has been bitten through. As a representational phantasm the poem is always and of necessity but a futile attempt by the subjective soul to achieve objective, intersubjective universality. Consider the history of our poetry since *Van Nu en Straks*, which took us from the individual toward the communal and then back to the subjective, from Stirner toward society back to idealist philosophy, after which the only thing that could follow would be an attempt at losing-oneself-in-God, at reaching ecstasy.<sup>3</sup>

Lo and behold: Poetry, then, springs from nostalgia for a homeland of complete knowledge and from the awareness of the vanity of every human venture toward that aim, from the dual motivation of longing and impotence that is also the origin of prayer.

And, again, lo and behold, this time on a much lower plane, within the realm of the everyday: I did not wait for the Reverend H. Brémond and his lecture on pure lyric to defend this position, nor am I indebted to him for coining the phrase *poésie pure*. For one thing, I had already propagated the doctrine of pure lyric in a 1922 essay in the magazine *Het Getij* (The tide).<sup>4</sup> For another, I argued that this type of lyric was a weakened form of ecstasy. Ever since then I have almost continuously

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3/ Van Ostaijen denies that poetry as he defines it here could be enlisted in political struggle because it cannot possibly speak in the name of social formations. He thereby also condemns his own, early work, which explicitly put itself at the service of the emancipation of the Flemish people from a Francophone elite in Belgium. Later, he will also use the derogatory term “polyandry” to characterize humanitarian-expressionist verse, of which his own collection *Het Sienjaal* (The signal, 1918) was a key example. The late nineteenth-century Flemish magazine *Van Nu en Straks* (Of today and tomorrow, 1893–1901) promoted the political activism of writers while rejecting traditional naturalist and realist writing. The work of anarchist philosopher Max Stirner, who advocated for the absolute artistic and political freedom of the individual, played a key role in the magazine’s aesthetic vision.

4/ In 1922, Van Ostaijen coined the phrase “*het zuiver poëtische*” (the pure-lyrical) in a defense of the rhythmic typography of his poetry volume *Bezette Stad* (Occupied city, 1921). Typography, he argued, was not a conscious “epiphenomenon” of the poem but a way of tapping into its “purely subconscious rhythmical necessity.” See his essay “*Open brief aan Jos. Léonard*” (An open letter to Jos. Léonard), *Het Getij* 7:4 (1922): 85–91.



spread these ideas. However, my views originated within our local culture, with its apparent, modern disinterest in poetry, which was more than enough reason for people not to take notice of my views in this age of airplanes and humanitarian polyandry.

Just as the *EXPRESSION* of ecstasy is the negation of the *PASSIVE* flowing-into-God, lyrical emotion is always the negation of the poet's pessimistic acceptance of his limited powers of representation—a pessimism that at bottom always incites lyricism. While different in kind, the movements of desire in ecstasy and her humble sister, poetry, are thus connected. If we accept the existence of pure lyric, we can only conclude that pure poetry is ultimately the lowest form of ecstasy. Like ecstasy, poetry never really conveys a message, except for the articulation of the being-filled-by-the-unspeakable. Just as ecstasy only thematizes how the felt dualism between God and His creatures is suspended, the poet's soul only knows the desire to continuously express the sense of losing the self in the transcendent piercing of the word. Both the ecstatic and the poet are consumed by a blaze felt deep inside.

What do I mean by this losing oneself in the transcendence of the word? Is it the meaning of the word or merely its sonic quality? I believe that it is a mistake to represent these as being opposed. Neither meaning nor sonic quality can be viewed independently. Words are not merely signs of things nor do things only exist lyrically as functions of words. In fact, the poet's task is to bring to the surface the resonance of the word in the subconscious, which resounds in the space between meaning and sonic quality. The poet can stress either of these extremes, and the resonance of the word in the subconscious is often codetermined by at times idiosyncratic and highly diverse mnemonic moments. Naturally, not all of these moments have a universal value that transcends the subjective, and I gladly admit—though not to the logicians, the people of common sense, to whom I admit nothing—that many poets practicing pure lyric, still inexperienced when it comes to the relation between the subjective and the universal, do not draw the line between the two precisely enough with their etching needles.

When meaning and phonetics coincide, I speak of the sonority of the word. By this I mean the vibrations between opposed values that can also be seen in contemporary painting, the imponderable that arises from the tension between two words, a tension that, although not expressed by any sign, *is* the essential vibration. To feel this sonority



is both nothing and everything. It is crude and rich. Rich because it is full of crudeness and crude because poetry's richness can only express itself through it. This is how it occurred to me: I was walking aimlessly through the streets when, suddenly, in the radiance of an abundance of light, I noticed these words glittering on the façade of a movie theater: "The happy death." They had a rare, unveiling force when I murmured them to myself. I went on pondering these words, which were strange and familiar, as if they were two companions that had found each other. I do not know whether this happened unexpectedly or whether they were meant to meet each other. The adjective leaned against the noun—it made the noun lighter, and I attempted to find something similar to it that would have expressed the depth of this resonance, but I could not get over the brilliance of these two words. I use these two words as an example of what I call full sonority. Apart from full sonorities there are also one-sided sonorities, those that reveal affinity by mere sonic quality or meaning. Later I will read you a poem that is filled only with the balancing of such affinities.<sup>5</sup>

Here I can risk the first and of course preliminary formulation: poetry, like all art, is matter sensitized, "matter" being the word with all its possibilities for subconscious effect, with all its moments of sensitization. I reject any interventions other than those needed to turn language into sensitized matter, because I experience such interventions as parasites in poetry. The poet's manipulation of language's metaphysics cannot be confused with the simple use of words as images of phenomena. His metaphysical engagement must dissolve itself entirely into the sensitization of the word, whether it be through the choice of the word's place in the poem, through the word's actions and reactions, through its ties of friendship and hostility, or through its principle of selection. In the end, words must thrust to the surface the specific subconscious substance that formed itself in the poet around a particular event. It is because of the novelty of this substance that the poet touches us. Hence, it is the word and not the sentence, with its intellectual sequence and meaning, that can make the transcendent audible to us. It is not the mind of the hearer that needs to be touched, but, crashing into the rational mind, his

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5/ The poem in question is "*Spleen pour Rire*," which was published in *Vlaamsche Arbeid* (Flemish labor) 21:5 (1926): 178.



subconscious. It is by communicating unknown resonances that the poet is new and that he shows us things as brand new.

Am I not developing here the splendid paradox of the conscious cultivation of the subconscious?—Let us be clear about this. There are two possible kinds of poetry: subconsciously inspired poetry and the consciously constructed type, and of course certain cases that form a cross section between them. Subconsciously inspired poetry results from ecstasy and is poetry's highest recognizable form. However, no single poet-*littérateur* can actually claim this type of poetry, because it remains an unattainable, purely ideal phenomenon. In true ecstasy there is no difference between form and matter. In poetry, by contrast, the poem's conscious form is constructed from subconscious matter. We therefore must discover the relationships of selection between words. To this end the sonic quality and the felt ties between sound and meaning form our best guides.

Someone now might retort: "I am fine with the comparative identity of poetry and ecstasy, but I cannot see the connection between your own poetry and any other kind that is also directed toward ecstasy. If I may: you are comparing apples and oranges, because, while dismissing God, you are nonetheless making an appeal to Him. Likewise, you are appealing to ecstasy without religion. You want to create a mysticism without anything mystical. From this it logically follows that you are not offering us mysticism but mystification."—Thus speaks the man who believes he is wed to common sense.

True, one does not simply found a school of mysticism. One seldom sets up a school for a short period of time, and even if one does it is unlikely to be a school of mysticism, because mysticism is the pinnacle of subjective isolation, of desolation even. Yet one can, without adopting the actual goal of mysticism, take frank advantage of the means it once employed for the exteriorization of the subjective. Poetry and mysticism meet in KNOWLEDGE, but in the former there is a mystic element surrounding the knowledge of concrete things—so far presented here in a schematic and primitive way—that replaces the mysticism of God. That said, every religious belief, too, starts with knowledge of the concrete, phenomenal world. The divine historical mysticism of Hadewych of Brabant and Katherina Vetter, among others, expresses itself in a realist mode by moving everyday matter



into the realm of visionary divinity.<sup>6</sup> In the absence of God, the poet follows the opposite route, from the noumenal to matter, yet in both the means are identical. Ecstasy and pure lyric from the subconscious both present a mysticism of things, and this mysticism allows us, without an appeal to God, to emphasize those things that were also accentuated by historical mystics and to employ the same means of subjective introspection to penetrate into the phantasmatic—that is, the mysterious side of things. I could have expressed myself even more briefly by stating that only for mystics does the word attain its deepest resonance. Those of you who know Mechtild von Magdeburg or even Angelus Silesius know that they played with the nearly empty word in childlike exaltation, and that their poems, like supple animals thrown high in the air, always land on their feet.<sup>7</sup> In short, a pure lyric poem, like the expression of ecstasy, carries the causalities of its development solely within itself. What separates pure lyric as a branch of intentional literature from ecstasy is that what remains a mere means for the one becomes the goal of the other. Still, the exaltation caused by the possibilities of the expression of subjective resonance pushes me towards mysticism. For once ecstasy has been locked out, exaltation carries its goal within itself. Exaltation in and of itself is the sole theme of pure lyric.

My exaltation is first of all caused by my words delving into the phantasmatic dimension of things and penetrating values that are buried too deep for the naked, conscious mind. Precisely this and only this exaltation triggered by the discovery of the possibility of exteriorization allows me to experience another exaltation incited by the phantasm of the intuitive *knowledge* of things. Thus, the development of the phantasm of the thing is salvaged in the machination of the word. And because this phantasm of knowledge soon becomes

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6/ Hadewych of Brabant was a thirteenth-century mystic from the Brabant region who innovated mystic lyric by adopting the form of troubadour love poetry to shape the relation between God and man. No trace of a mystic named Katharina Vetter exists; presumably Van Ostaijen means Katarina Emmerich, short for Anne Catherine Emmerich, whom he mentions in his poetry volume *De feesten van angst en pijn* (Feasts of fear and agony, 1921).

7/ Mechtild von Magdeburg launched a trend in mystic literature by writing in the German vernacular rather than Latin. Angelus Silesius perfected the form of the concise epigram as an expression of mysticism's paradoxes.



a phantasm of the word, as I will presently explain, I rationally tread from the noumenal into the phenomenal. A healthy state of affairs, is it not? This will also please the critics who examine a poem like a doctor does his patient.

To avoid possible misunderstandings, let me add this: when I talk about the recreation of the phantasm of the event by the phantasm of the word, one could infer that I am concerned with the “translation” of a certain event. I would thus confine myself to descriptive poetry. Nothing could be further from the truth. Rather, I strive for a poem without a concrete theme, for thematically sterile poetry. The topic of the poem is the poem itself. Actual physical events disappear into the subconscious where they mingle and change under each other’s influence. My lyricism arises from the resin that is formed by this process. To present this lyricism, and nothing else, is my main purpose, just as the ecstatic does not want to express anything other than his ecstasy. I strive toward the complete poverty of subject matter so that the mind may not be distracted by anything secondary that is not of the nature of pure lyric. Moreover, my poetry is a plant that needs sand rather than clay and can only develop in barren ground. The subconscious provides the matter through which I can lyrically develop the thematic premise-sentence, the opening series of words in a poem. So be aware: when I write poetry it is because I trust in having nothing, absolutely nothing to say. The most ordinary rhetorician and the youngest schoolboy have more to say than I. I only want my lyricism. The study of the lyrical bacillus is still a virgin field.

Therefore, I want pure lyric and an exclusively esoterically determined poem. One might object that the determinants of every poem are esoteric, and I would have to agree. But I can save myself by pointing out the important fact that esotericism has now become technique itself. Given the demonism of the poetic word there is no room for a priori compositional rules. The lyrical bacillus gluttonously devours everything it encounters. The logic of a poem can only be measured by the logic of the organic development from beginning to end. Words are like the organs of an organism: they are determining and self-determined. The poem has no subject—it is the subject. It is not the poet that is important, but the poem. The “I” remains the highest good, though not the “I” of the poet, but the “I” of the poem.



The starting point or decisive moment for the creation of any poem can only be a pure-lyric event. For example, the poet can have an experience of the rhythm of the desired poem. Alternatively, he can retain a lyrical experience from an impression that he then develops organically based on a premise-sentence, in search for a balance between that impression's representation and the sensation that originates from the subconscious matter surrounding this representation. This means that I do not know how a poem will turn out when I posit the premise-sentence: I wait for the repercussions of this sentence in my felt subconscious. The roots of the plant know just as little about the future flower. In this process, temporal succession is often ignored and consequences determine causes no less frequently than causes determine consequences. The task of lyrical consciousness is to guard the border so that repercussion-sentences do not cross the boundaries of the premise.

Here, we have ventured deep into the domain of actual technique. I distance myself even more from free verse than from academic prosody, first and foremost because free verse is a bit too free for me and because I do not know what to do with all that freedom. One might retort that I may be cheating myself, since it is all too clear that my verse is free verse. Yet I beg your pardon, dear objector; free verse has a continuous cadence, while my verse is orchestrated. The continuous cadence of free verse does not allow words to come to the fore as independent organs. It just keeps on running like an egg timer. A poem is not an hourglass or a stopwatch. Now and then it halts or retraces its steps. Writers of *vers libre* never syncopate. In *vers libre* words seldom have any depth and time passes smoothly and steadily. It moves without interruption toward "*durée pure*." A word used in free verse is without independence, without *aséité*. Thus, free verse cannot offer the highest possibilities for the sensitization of the word. In our free verse poetry, from Verhaeren to Wies Moens, there is a diffusion of the word rather than a concentration toward its core. And because this diffusion is sentimental, one could label it a dangerous enlarging of the heart. Compared to older forms of prosody, symbolist or humanitarian-expressionist free verse is centrifugal. My free verse seeks a new prosody, but an organic rather than a mechanical one. Organic prosody: self-sufficient sentences or sets of words, a logical development out of the premise, and a



conclusion that lyrically-logically motivates the establishment of the premise. For too long, *vers-librisme* has been the postimpressionist luminism of our poetry. It is time to move forward.<sup>8</sup>

First and foremost I demand the formal independence of the organs that constitute the organism. Poems must be what hands are to the body: complete in and of themselves. The *aséité* of each organ helps me experience a poem's fleeting emotion. The parts of a poem are not simply to be motivated by the sum total. Like organs to an organism: that is how things should be.

Second, the image is an intruder with the manners of a petty officer. Its appeal to reason is annoyingly dissonant in lyric and its disciplinary method of the simile—"you to the left, you others to the right"—disturbs my associated lyrical poignancy. The image is ornamental, but I want substantial depth and not cliché. I demand the factual and legal emancipation of all parts and not a method in which I attempt to legitimize one idiot by giving him another as a companion.

Finally, I reject all poetry of mood in favor of a poetry of perceptivity. All moods or states of mind are equally uninteresting. When modern poets settle for the description of a state, believing that their account is lyrical in and of itself, I wish them the best of luck, but I cannot follow along. Such poetry stands or falls with the honesty of its poets, and since all poets are born liars it falls with this honesty. The poem of perceptivity, in contrast, can be controlled solely by the qualities of this perceptivity. To the poet, moreover, all states of mind are situated on the same plane. This is one of our most extraordinary discoveries. Our vantage point is that of the detached critic, and we do not set forth a new ethics but wish to advance epistemology. *Bitte schön*, we are aiming for a literature that will one day be a-literary.

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8/ Van Ostaijen once again returns to the history of Flemish writing to make his point. Emile Verhaeren (1855–1916) was a Flemish symbolist author writing in French. Wies Moens's (1898–1982) early free-verse poetry was often characterized as "humanitarian-expressionist" and as serving the Flemish Nationalist Movement. By likening their free verse to early twentieth-century luminism, a painting style similar to pointillism, Van Ostaijen is asserting that Flemish poetry, including his own early work composed in free verse, is unable to see artistic innovation through to the end.



It is not the written poem that is of importance—that is a mainstay. What counts is the sonority that is not written down, the entirety of the poet as expressive subject. One can only approach the written poem in relation to the nonwritten whole. As an aside: a poem can never be longer than twelve lines. If it has more, I take recourse to the simplest of solutions: I strike out everything from the thirteenth line on.

Things that cannot inspire me: man's alleged inherent goodness, living a purer life, vegetarianism, the poverty of ladies of the evening as catalyst for local sentimental poets in a state of *tristitia-post*, Homeric battles with sentences written down between eight and ten at night, humility or hubris, the attic room or the Empire bed. Likewise: the cult of cars, airplanes, or what is commonly referred to as the act of declaiming our roaring times. In short: all "serious" literature. Down with the sextons and other ministers. Forget the improvement of humanity, but long live the improvement of the thoroughbred! Long live Pegasus known as Foxtrot II.